

WHO'S NEXT

Kat Hennessey

MORGAN JAMES

HOMETOWN: Modesto, Calif.
INFLUENCES: Etta James, Donny Hathaway, Eva Cassidy
ALBUM: *Morgan James Live*, out now
WEBSITE: morganjamesonline.com

SINGER MORGAN JAMES ENTERED THE JUILLIARD SCHOOL at age 18 as an opera student, but eventually abandoned that career path to pursue musical theater. "For a long time I wasn't sure what to do with the fact that I've got this gigantic voice that doesn't quite match how I look," she says, "so I ended up trying out lots of different things to find my way."

After a series of false starts, James found her teenage dreams turning into a reality on Broadway. She appeared in the original casts of *The Addams Family* and *Wonderland*, as well as the first-ever Broadway revival of *Godspell*. Building on her newfound success, she began performing regular solo gigs at New York City nightclubs. "It's pretty grueling, working all day and all night," James admits, "but it's really taught me the importance of stamina and taking care of my body, my instrument. On Broadway you're in an environment of

constant creation, with so much creative energy swirling around—it's so stimulating and inspiring to me."

One result of James' intense work ethic is her debut album, *Morgan James Live*, a modern fusion of soul, jazz and R&B. Recorded at Dizzy's Club Cola-Cola, a jazz club in New York City, the album features James' renditions of songs culled from the repertoire of Nina Simone. The California native puts a new spin on classics such as "I Put a Spell on You," "Tell Me More and More and Then Some" and "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood." Simone's vocal style—along with her boundless ambitions—have been influential in James' own musical development. "Nina refused to be pigeonholed into any one genre and she wasn't setting out to impress anyone," she says. "That sort of purity and lack of showboating means so much to me as a musician."